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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the creative process of one author, a professional author/illustrator of picture books. The paper muses about the meaning of creativity and originality and states inspiration has to do with careful research and looking for a challenge. Creativity is about testing one proposition against another and seeing how things combine and react. It claims that his work as an illustrator has a lot to do with combining various ideas from different sources to produce unexpected results, very much like rubbing different stones together for sparks, and gradually working them into flames. According to the paper, the author/illustrator's most widely circulated and discussed book, "The Rabbits," is the story of colonization everywhere, about power, ignorance, and environmental destruction, but it is also an animal fable, a dark and serious one. The paper describes the broad research process which was involved in bringing the book to completion. It also discusses the research process for another book, "The Lost Thing." The paper finds that what really matters is whether readers continue to think about the things they have read and seen long after the final page is turned. (NKA)

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ORIGINALITY AND CREATIVITY

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Original thought is like original sin: both happened before

you were born to people you could not possibly have met.

- Fran Liebowitz

Books! Bottled chatter! Things that some other simian has formerly said.

- Clarence Day.

Paul Klee once described an artist as being like a tree, drawing the minerals of experience from its roots - things known, observed, read, intuited and felt - and slowly processing them into new leaves. Similarly, the science writer Stephen Jay Gould notes that the greatest discoveries are to be found not in a freshly hewn cliff of shale, but in old museum collections, by rethinking the relationships between the objects that have already know about.

The principle that 'originality' is more about a kind of transformation of existing ideas than the invention of the absolutely new is one that I can relate to as an artist and author. I'm wary of using words like 'inspiration' or 'creativity' without at least trying to demystify them first. They can easily convey a false impression that ideas or feelings appear spontaneously and of their own accord; "creation" in particular is a term that originally entered our language with divine connotations. My own experience is that inspiration is has more to do with careful research and looking for a challenge; and that creativity is about playing with what I find, testing one proposition against another and seeing how things combine and react.

My picture books have in the past been recognised as 'highly imaginative', 'strikingly original' and even 'magical'. There is, however, nothing mysterious about the way they are produced. Each work contains many thousands of ingredients, experiments, discoveries and transforming decisions executed over several months, compressed into a very small space, 32 pages of words and pictures. Everything can be explained in terms of process, influences, developmental elaboration and reduction. What is original is not the ideas themselves, but the way they are put together. The fact that we recognise anything at all would seem to indicate that this is the case - a truly original idea would probably be so unfamiliar as to be unreadable, an impenetrably alien artifact.

Often the most interesting stories are ones which tell us things that we already know but haven't yet articulated in our minds. Or more precisely, they encourage us to look at familiar things in different ways, as if to remind us of their true meaning; the way we live, the things we encounter, way we think and so on. Looking at my own work as an

illustrator, I can discuss how this has a lot to do with combining various ideas from different sources to produce unexpected results, very much like rubbing different stones together for sparks, and gradually working these into flames.

The Rabbits is a good example, and perhaps my most widely circulated and discussed book. On one hand it is a story we should all be familiar with as an historical narrative, the European invasion of Australia and subsequent injustices perpetrated against the indigenous population. More universally, it's the story of colonisation everywhere, about power, ignorance and environmental destruction. It is also an animal fable, a dark and serious one, a storytelling strategy we can also recognise. One might think of Richard Adams' Watership Down or George Orwell's Animal Farm as precedents, for instance, but already there is an unexpected combining of elements we haven't seen before, quite strange and 'original.'

When I received John Marsden's text for this book, via my publisher, I experienced a sensation that usually accompanies the beginning of a new project: not knowing what to do. By itself, the half-page fax of text generated no ideas visually - none that were appropriately interesting at least (the image of Beatrix Potter bunnies with redcoats, muskets and British flags was not going to work - that's one thing I did know). I eventually realised that what I had to do was extend the metaphorical logic of the text even further, and introduce more unexpected ideas to build a parallel story of my own. Not an illustration of the text, but something to react with it symbiotically.

The research involved was very broad, an omnivorous study of everything from tree kangaroos at Perth Zoo, which I spent a day sketching, to old Victorian photographs of

public works being constructed, colonial drawings in the State gallery, books about antique furniture, industrial architecture, Surrealism. I also reviewed some of my old science fiction drawings languishing in my folio, including a couple which happened to deal with 18th century figures in strange antipodean deserts, and ended up working several ideas from these into The Rabbits.

Stylistically, the book borrows both consciously and unconsciously from many sources: Ancient Egyptian friezes, unusual films such as Brazil and Yellow Submarine, the work of other illustrators such as Ralph Steadman, Milton Glaser, Gerald Scarfe and some Australian landscape painters; Arthur Streeton, Fred Williams and Brett Whiteley. The list goes on; ultimately I am influenced by anything that seems interesting to me, whether it's a painting in a gallery or the pattern of plumbing on the wall behind my local supermarket.

My own personal style of drawing, painting and thinking visually emerges from all of these, not to mention innumerable other experiences.

As well as visual sources, many ideas for the illustrations emerged from reading history. Almost every image can, for instance, be footnoted with a reference to Henry Reynold's "The Other Side of the Frontier", my most valuable reference book. Accounts of Aboriginal impressions of the arrival of European ships, animals, customs and technologies, the immense cultural rift between visitors and inhabitants, the patterns of escalating violence: all these proved to be indispensable in the creation of an equivalent imagined universe populated by strange animals and machines.

I'm often thinking of different things I've read, or particular words, while I draw and paint which best express the particular poetry of colour, line and form I am after. A passage from David Malouf's Remembering Babylon, which I happened to have been reading just before working on The Rabbits, suggested to me one way of illustrating a particular scene as a bright, lyrical landscape; "...alive and dazzling; some of it even in the deepest shade throwing off luminous flares... and all of it crackling and creaking and swelling and bursting with growth." The illustration itself is vibrant and yellow, swimming with hidden shapes and organic tensions.

I had also finished my arts degree honours dissertation a couple of years beforehand, which was all about the way in which industrial cultures typically view the natural world through some kind of technological apparatus, whether photographs, wildlife documentaries, telecommunications, theme parks or computer imaging. As a result, many of the pictures for the Rabbits tend to be about looking at the world through various artificial framing devices. Lenses, telescopes, maps and paintings feature strongly, all transforming perceptions of an unfamiliar country to meet particular cultural expectations. The inability of the rabbits to see the look beyond their own preconceptions and flawed ideals is a central theme that emerges from these visual cues.

The illustration used on the cover for The Rabbits is a particularly good example of developing imagery from reference sources. It is based on a 19th century painting of Cook's first landing at Botany Bay, a colour reproduction of which I found in an old encyclopaedia. The arrangement of figures striding ashore from left to right is mirrored by the rabbit figures, with similar clothing, flag and gun; two Aborigines on a distant

dune in the original painting have been replaced by two marsupial animals. There are similar lighting and atmospheric effects at work, although quite exaggerated, and the use of oils on canvas with thin yellow glazes emulates the technique used in paintings of the period.

It could almost be read as a satirical parody, although this is not really my intention. Whether the source is recognisable is irrelevant: what does matter is the resonance. It borrows rather than alludes, evoking a certain 19th Century European way of framing moments of historical significance, where key figures are actors on the world's stage, supernaturally well composed, monumental and mythical. Everything about the source painting by E. Phillips Fox contains a familiar ideology, all about progress and destiny, the planting of flags and the arrival of legitimate historical narrative.

These are ideas that we are invited to read in a less recognisable and more challenging form in my own illustration. The ship leaps forth like a skyscraper or knife, echoed by scalpel-like shadows and pointed feet, collars and guns, the lighting is more theatrical than ever. I wanted to introduce a surreal dreamlike quality, ambiguous in terms of mixed awe and dread, exaggerated but not caricatured or didactic. Most of all, I wanted to produce an image that was enigmatic and thought-provoking. It's up to the reader to draw whatever meaning they wish.

Like The Rabbits, The Lost Thing is quite a strange book, but its success among readers is due in no small part to a familiar premise, a boy finding a lost animal at his local beach and taking it home. In itself, very unoriginal, except that this is just a point of departure, much as the history of colonisation is for The Rabbits. The lost animal is, after all, not a

stray dog, but a huge tentacled creature evolved from drawings of pebble crabs and old-fashioned cast iron stoves, among other things. Furthermore, the setting of the story owes more to my visual research of industrial architecture, including a local derelict power station in East Perth, and the urban landscapes of artists like Edward Hopper, John Brack and Jeffrey Smart, than your average residential suburb.

Many other elements based on various references are combined; ideas from looking at a 1930's copy of Popular Mechanics, some of my Dad's old physics and calculus textbooks which I used as a collage medium in the final illustrations, photographs of cloud formations and Melbourne trams. I also had a reproduction of the medieval artist Hieronymous Bosch's bizarre painting "The Garden of Earthly Delights" stuck on my kitchen cupboard, next to a photograph of air-intake pipes on a ship by Charles Sheeler, and American modernist painter. All of these elements came together in the production of a visual narrative that is at once very simple and accessible, yet complex and irreducibly enigmatic.

For me, that's what creativity is - playing with found objects, reconstructing things that already exist, transforming ideas or stories I already know. It's not about the colonisation of new territory, it's about exploring inwards, examining your existing presumptions, squinting at the archive of experience from new angles, and hoping for some sort of revelation. What really matters is whether we as readers continue to think about the things we have read and seen long after the final page is turned.